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Review Editor: Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

REVIEW BY TRYGVE THRONTVEIT, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Why Knock's Wilson Matters

It is perhaps too much to say that we are in the midst of a Woodrow Wilson ‘renaissance’; at any rate, the enduringly controversial nature of the twenty-eighth president’s career and legacy makes it hazardous to proclaim one. Still, the centenary of Wilson’s 1917 call for American intervention in Europe, the proliferating challenges to international cooperation and multilateral institutions, and the rise to power of perhaps the most brazenly nationalistic and diplomatically disruptive American president in history, seem to have stoked a rekindling, at least, of interest in the most radically internationalist and diplomatically creative figure to occupy the White House. As Tony Smith argues in his recent book, *Why Wilson Matters*, it is impossible either to understand the international order of the mid-to-late twentieth century or to formulate responses to its unravelling since the end of the Cold War without taking stock of Woodrow Wilson’s policies and their legacies for American and world politics.¹

Indeed, embers of interest in Wilson and his relevance have been glowing since the Cold War’s end, and none more brightly than Thomas J. Knock’s *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*, recently reissued with a new author’s preface by Princeton University Press. According to World Cat, no fewer than 631 books containing the phrase “Woodrow Wilson” in the title and listing “Wilson, Woodrow” as a major subject heading have been published since 1992, the year Knock’s book was first published by Oxford University Press. To my knowledge, Knock’s is the only one of these works to be reissued in a special twenty-fifth anniversary edition. Granting that many have been published in the last decade, and several quite recently—permitting their authors’ to imagine such an honor in future, should they be so profligate with their dreams—it nevertheless bears asking: What sets *To End All Wars* apart? Sure, the book won a highly regarded prize (the Warren F. Kuehl Prize of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations); and yes, its mix of clear argument and meticulous research, combined with relatively broad coverage and highly accessible style, convinced Princeton University Press to buy the rights from Oxford University Press and market it (quite successfully, according to my own unscientific scan of syllabi) as *the* book on Wilson for undergraduate and graduate courses alike. Yet the editors of Princeton University Press have clearly identified a new market, or new need, for an unaltered but reframed version of Knock’s narrative—a reason to make explicit what they clearly consider its implicit relevance to the issues of today.

I think they were shrewd to do so; for, thirty-odd years after its original conception and writing, *To End All Wars* has reemerged in historiographical and political landscapes that remain, in significant and disappointing ways, largely unchanged since the early 1990s.

¹ Tony Smith, *Why Wilson Matters: The Origin of American Liberal Internationalism and Its Crisis Today* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

The originality and the stakes of Knock's historiographical intervention were clear to reviewers of the original edition. "He does not merely reinterpret Wilson," wrote Gary Ostrower in *The American Historical Review*; "he challenges virtually every recent historian who has tackled the subject. Knock demands that we see Wilson in a genuinely new framework, and succeeds admirably."² "Its arguments are new, compelling, and persuasive," Mark T. Gilderhus said of Knock's book in *The Journal of American History*. Knock, Gilderhus continued, "reverses the usual order" of scholarship on Wilson's diplomacy, giving less space to the creation and American reception of the League of Nations than to "the ideological origins of Woodrow Wilson's peace plan."³ These were authoritative voices, and they were right: Knock's book attacked some of the most enduring shibboleths of Wilson scholarship and the history of early-twentieth century American political and diplomatic history generally. In contrast to the prevailing caricatures (then and now) of Wilson the clumsy crusader or cynical chauvinist, Knock's Wilson was simultaneously a principled idealist and a pragmatic, highly skilled politician. A prolific scholar in the fields of American history, democratic theory, and comparative political science, Knock's Wilson formulated a response to the revolutionary world of the 1910s that recognized both the interdependence of local, national, and international life and the inextricability of domestic and foreign politics. A long career in academe also encouraged his presidential interest in and respect for the ideas of other careful thinkers working outside the political establishment—a fact of critical importance to Knock's political narrative, through which is woven a taught intellectual history of Progressive Era policymaking.

That history was new to most readers. As Gilderhus noted, Knock rejected "New Left" accounts of Wilson as a "liberal-capitalist internationalist" who was bent on molding the world to serve American economic interests.⁴ Instead Knock emphasized the dominance of two other ideological camps contending for control over the nation's response to global war. In one camp stood "progressive internationalists" (xix-xx) like peace activist and settlement-house pioneer Jane Addams, political theorist and *New Republic* editor Herbert Croly, socialist cultural critic and *Masses* founder Max Eastman, and civil-rights activist and *Nation* editor Oswald Garrison Villard, who viewed war as a political problem requiring political solutions and political forums for reaching them, lest its disruptions and hatreds threaten the safety of democracy even in the United States. In another stood "conservative internationalists" (xx) like former secretary of war and state Elihu Root, former president William Howard Taft, and Massachusetts senator Henry Cabot Lodge, who viewed war as a legal problem, posing threats to national security that would only be exacerbated by political entanglements and their accompanying constraints on U.S. action. Knock's Wilson belonged firmly in the first camp, which included a broad swath of public figures identified with the liberal, progressive, and even socialist left. Indeed, perhaps Knock's most original contribution—noted by nearly all his reviewers—was to unearth what he described as Wilson's "communion of profound significance with the American left" (xx) and, thereby, to demonstrate that the progressive internationalist vision Wilson came to embrace was not just one of international peace through deliberative diplomacy but also one of domestic justice through social democracy.

The historiographical implications of such arguments were significant, and their historical implications enormous. As Thomas D. Schoonover noted in *Reviews in American History*, Knock's Wilson was not the "novice in international relations" to whom so many historians have condescended, but rather "the president best prepared to handle international relations since John Quincy Adams." Even more important than this Wilson's *preparation* for world politics, however, was his *vision* for its future—especially in light of his ability, demonstrated in the 1916 election, to unite center-left, progressive, and not a few socialist Americans behind his leadership. As Schoonover accurately reported, Knock's Wilson did not intend to establish the "security state" desired by his conservative internationalist rivals (and achieved by his mid-twentieth century

² Gary Ostrower, review of Thomas J. Knock's *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*, *American Historical Review* 99:1 (February 1994): 320-321, quoted 320.

³ Mark T. Gilderhus, review of *To End All Wars*, *Journal of American History* 80:4 (March 1994): 1504-1505, quoted 1505.

⁴ Gilderhus, 1505.

successors) but to lay the groundwork for “world government.”⁵ Moreover, Wilson’s considerable skills as a politician and diplomatist—which Knock’s accounts of the 1916 election (86-104) and the 1919 peace negotiations (194-209) demonstrated as clearly as any work before or since—made that radical goal more than a gauzy dream. As Jan Schulte Nordholt wrote in *Diplomatic History*, regarding the diverse Americans Knock included in “the coalition of 1916” (85), “The author almost suggests that perhaps together they might have been able to reach their great goal.”⁶

Knock’s mountain of empirical evidence and powerful forensic skills obviously struck against views so settled among many historians that they had hardened into bedrock. To be sure, as John A. Thompson aptly noted, “Wilsonianism” has always been “a conflicted concept.”⁷ Nevertheless, by the time Knock published *To End All Wars*, the bulk of the literature on Wilson’s broad vision for international politics had assumed an elliptical coherence, arranging itself, as suggested, around two distinct interpretive poles. The ‘clumsy crusader’ view portrayed Wilson as a moralistic, self-righteous, woolly-headed naïf, deluding himself and the public with an impossible vision of global democracy that ignored the most basic political realities. Pioneered by John Maynard Keynes, E. H. Carr, and erstwhile Wilsonian Walter Lippmann, this view was elaborated after 1945 by several self-styled ‘realists’ into a critique of Wilson as the archetype of a misguided idealist tradition in American foreign policy—a simple but powerful heuristic that still shapes the political science literature.⁸ The opposite (yet no more flattering) “cynical chauvinist” view of Wilson has, in some form or other, long been most prevalent among historians. In the late 1950s and 1960s, historians of the so-called ‘Wisconsin School’ recast the history of American foreign policy—including during the Wilson administration—as the history of American economic imperialism, prompting others to interpret the major phase of Wilson’s foreign policy—from his Fourteen Points address through the Paris peace negotiations—in an anti-Bolshevist framework.⁹ When Knock’s book first appeared, the assumption that Wilson was at best an unreflective tool of American corporate capitalism and at worst its chief apostle was only just entering its eclipse (or rather absorption) by the view of Wilson as an equal-opportunity chauvinist, asserting the superiority of his classist, sexist,

⁵ Thomas D. Schoonover, “To End All Social Reform: A Progressive’s Search for International Order,” *Reviews in American History* 21 (1993): 647-654, at 647, 648.

⁶ Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt, “The Prophet in Politics,” review of *To End All Wars*, *Diplomatic History* 18:4 (1994): 561-564, quoted 562.

⁷ John A. Thompson, “Wilsonianism: Dynamics of a Conflicted Concept,” *International Affairs* 86:1 (2010): 27-48.

⁸ John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (London: Macmillan, 1919); E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1940); Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1943); George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951); Hans J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest: A Critical Examination of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Knopf, 1951); Robert E. Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America’s Foreign Relations: The Great Transformation of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); Roland N. Stromberg, *Collective Security and American Foreign Policy: From the League of Nations to NATO* (New York: Praeger, 1963). A recent example equating “Wilsonianism” with the effort to export American political practices and achieve “liberal hegemony” is Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

⁹ See, e.g., William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: World, 1959); Carl P. Parrini, *Heir to Empire: United States Economic Diplomacy, 1916–1923* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1969). The subtlest argument that practical and ideological considerations of political economy shaped the basic contours of Wilson’s policymaking is N. Gordon Levin, *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America’s Response to War and Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968). Useful, but exaggerating the importance of anti-bolshevism to Wilson’s thinking, are Arno J. Mayer, *Wilson vs. Lenin: Political Origins of the New Diplomacy, 1917–1918* (Cleveland: World, 1964); Arno J. Mayer, *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles, 1918–1919* (New York: Knopf, 1967); and David S. Foglesong, *America’s Secret War Against Bolshevism: U.S. Intervention in the Russian Civil War, 1917–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

racist nation's dominant political-economic and socio-cultural institutions over those of the world's underdeveloped, unmanly, non-white peoples.¹⁰

Meanwhile, between 1945 and 1992, interpretations of Wilson's legacy for US foreign policy exhibited similar bipolarity. Most scholars, to be sure, agreed on the dominance of a "Wilsonian" posture during the decades of "bipartisan Cold War consensus" following World War II; but they diverged sharply over the wisdom of its adoption and details of its execution.¹¹ As noted, the early realists and their successors, especially among students and critics of American 'grand strategy,' tended to portray Wilson as the father of an expansive, even comprehensive, yet undisciplined quest for American global influence.¹² Other scholars lamented such arrogant, on-our-terms internationalism—which Knock himself termed "globalism" (272)—for hampering the embrace of multilateral initiatives and the acceptance of international restraints that Wilson advocated, while simultaneously implicating Wilson in the process. Indeed, the eminent political scientist Stanley Hoffmann dubbed the continuing recurrence of such ironic (and frequently racist and imperialist) efforts to promote democracy the "Wilsonian syndrome."¹³

Four prominent reviews of the first edition of *To End All Wars* reveal the interpretive inertia that the clumsy crusader and cynical chauvinist schools brought to bear in the early 1990s, hinting at the durability of a bipolar Wilson discourse long after the end of a bipolar world order. Francis P. Sempa, writing for *Presidential Studies Quarterly* from his post as Deputy Attorney General for Pennsylvania, lambasted Knock for his "one-sided, ideological defense" of Wilson's League of Nations project.¹⁴ Chastising Knock for ignoring both "Germany's quest for continental hegemony" and "the physical break-up of three great empires composed of numerous national, ethnic and religious groups"—neither of which, in fact, Knock ignored (see, for example, 121-122, 139-140, 223-224)—Sempa himself ignored Knock's careful reconstruction of the League design Wilson secured at Paris and its divergence from the League that actually emerged in the aftermath of the U.S. Senate's failure to accept membership. Instead, Sempa rested his own case on a hyperbolic appeal to folk wisdom: "One would never know from reading Knock's book what an abysmal failure the League of Nations turned out to be in the 1920s and 1930s," or find any similar testament to "the imperfectability of human beings and governments and the vast cultural, political, religious, national and ethnic differences among people and states" that, in Sempa's view, had escaped Wilson's comprehension.¹⁵ Schoonover, meanwhile, took a different tack, questioning Knock's claim that Wilson even *wanted*, much less planned effectively for, a system of democratic checks on inter-state aggression and Great-Power imperialism. "It is not clear that Wilson wanted to incorporate smaller powers, colonies, and weaker groups into his collective world organization," wrote Schoonover. In fact, he continued, Wilson's political philosophy generally, in its domestic and international guises, lacked any "philosophy [of] and commitment to the common good, social justice, and economic fairness." Instead—and Knock's evidence aside (see, for example, 15-30, 105-122)—Wilson's was a typically bourgeois "free market ideology" celebrating

¹⁰ An early—as well as thoughtful and scholarly rather than ideological and polemic—example of this shift in Wilson scholarship is Lloyd E. Ambrosius, *Woodrow Wilson and the American Diplomatic Tradition: The Treaty Fight in Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

¹¹ Levin, *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics*, 260.

¹² See, e.g., Ronald Steel, *Pax Americana* (New York: Penguin, 1967).

¹³ Stanley Hoffmann, *Gulliver's Troubles; Or, the Setting of American Foreign Policy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968). See also Levin, *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics* David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972).

¹⁴ Francis P. Sempa, review of *To End All Wars*, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 23:4 (1993): 820-822, quoted 820.

¹⁵ Sempa, review of *To End All Wars*, 821.

“individualism, unequal distribution, and corporate capitalism.”¹⁶ David S. Foglesong, writing in the *International History Review*, was similarly unpersuaded of Wilson’s leftist credentials and internationalist aims. Emphasizing Wilson’s refusal to recognize the Soviet regime in Russia and his interventions there and in Latin America—though silent on Knock’s accounts of these matters (24-30, 81-84, 154-159)—Foglesong invoked storied cold warrior Allen Dulles (Director of Central Intelligence under President Dwight Eisenhower) and other (allegedly) self-styled “heirs” of Wilson to conclude that the twenty-eighth president’s true legacy is, in fact, the very “globalism” that Knock impertinently “disinherits” in Wilson’s name.¹⁷

Finally, Nordholt, writing in *Diplomatic History*, barely recognized the Wilson Knock portrayed: a complex character, exhibiting a sometimes bewildering but often effective mix of idealism and pragmatism alongside a healthy ration of short-sighted and stomach-turning prejudice. Instead, he saw a chimerical grotesque combining the vapidity of the clumsy crusader with the narcissism of the cynical chauvinist. “The author takes Wilson’s lofty words too literally; he seems not to be aware of their strong rhetorical element,” wrote Nordholt—apparently without consulting the most pertinent chapter (11, “The Stern Covenant”), which meticulously reconstructed Wilson’s strenuous efforts to realize his rhetoric at Paris.¹⁸ Whereas Wilson’s fanatical bench of “Left-wing idealists” actually believed in “an abstract theory that would enable them to remake the world,” Wilson himself, Nordholt insisted, “was really a conservative,” committed to the idea that international reform could only come about slowly, “through Christian renewal.” Given this fact—apparently so obvious as to render Knock’s multi-chapter treatment of Wilson’s political thought redundant (3-30)—Knock’s account of Wilson’s “rather hesitating sympathy for the Mexican Revolution” was a red herring, and no discussion of Knock’s analysis—which simultaneously illuminated Wilson’s obvious prejudices, his well-founded fears about the motives of the contending parties, his private and public disputes with rabid interventionists in and outside government, and the personally painful and humanly wasteful learning process he underwent between 1914 and 1916 (e.g. 9, 24-30, 38-39, 81-84)—was necessary. Where Knock found clues to Wilson’s political and, more important, intellectual adaptability, Nordholt saw the familiar outline of an essentially static character: the fanciful chauvinist who, in revolutionary Mexico and war-torn Europe, “believed in leadership, in his own leadership in the first place, effected through the magic of his lofty rhetoric.”¹⁹

For those keeping up with more recent American historical literature, these critiques will not just ring bells. They will sound so familiar as to be trite. Today, the assumption that nationalist and racist chauvinism was essential to Wilson’s vision for a new world order is basic for almost any historian not directly familiar with the vast documentary record of his presidency (which is to say, most historians).²⁰ The past decade or so has seen a handful of more balanced and historically substantiated critiques of Wilson from a realist perspective. But even these tend to read the past backward through the lens of the League’s failure to prevent a second world war, while failing to outline clear criteria for identifying (prospectively, rather than in hindsight) the “national interest” Wilson purportedly ignored and eliding the possibility that both national interests and

¹⁶ Schoonover, “To End All Social Reform,” 647-654, quoted 653.

¹⁷ David S. Foglesong, review of *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order* by Thomas J. Knock, *International History Review* 15:4 (November 1993): 826-828, quoted 828.

¹⁸ Nordholt, “Prophet in Politics,” 562

¹⁹ Nordholt, 563.

²⁰ Important works in which Wilson’s political aims are a relevant, harshly criticized, but not intensively researched factor include Mary Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

political options are constituted and constrained by societal values.²¹ Efforts to explain Wilson's foreign policy as a Christian missionary project have vastly improved since Nordholt reduced Wilson to a romantic mystic convinced of matter's subservience to spirit.²² But in privileging an ethnocentric, imperialistic faith over his secular diplomatic environment, calculations, and goals, even the best of these demonstrate the enduring power of the old categories to constrain any meaningful treatment of Wilson as a politician.²³ That power is even more apparent in Patricia O'Toole's recent portrayal of Wilson as an uptight "moralist" who refused to cajole and schmooze with his inferiors in Congress to get things done.²⁴

As for Wilson's legacy—both for subsequent history and contemporary foreign policy—political scientists since the fall of European Communism have not so much collapsed the traditional interpretations as magnetized them together, identifying the coercive exportation of idealized American institutions as the defining feature of Wilson's foreign policy and American grand strategy in the twentieth century.²⁵ After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and throughout the first decade of the War on Terror, literary artists of various political persuasions imbued this portrait of Wilson with the physiognomy of a prehistoric neoconservative, whose direct descendants include Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush.²⁶ The impenetrability of the political science field to a vision as thoroughly internationalist as Wilson's is best demonstrated by Tony Smith's *Why Wilson Matters*—an analytically sophisticated and, in tone, highly sympathetic examination of Wilson's political writings and foreign policies paired, confusingly, with a manifesto for a revived Cold War consensus.²⁷

None of this is to suggest that Knock's book, and Knock's Wilson, had no impact. At the very least—despite Sempa's charges of leftist hagiography—Knock rescued Wilson from his previous admirers. There had always been a few dissenters from the dominant schools, some quite prominent. Denna Frank Fleming, the pre-eminent student of US relations with the League of Nations between the world wars, and Arthur S. Link, Wilson's biographer and editor of the 69-volume *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, stand out among early examples; later, Betty Miller Unterberger and August Heckscher were pioneers in

²¹ Lloyd E. Ambrosius, *Wilsonianism: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy in American Foreign Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Ross A. Kennedy, *The Will to Believe: Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and America's Strategy for Peace and Security* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2009).

²² Nordholt, "Prophet in Politics," 563; Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt, *Woodrow Wilson: A Life for World Peace* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

²³ Mark Benbow, *Leading Them to the Promised Land: Woodrow Wilson, Covenant Theology, and the Mexican Revolution, 1913-1915* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2010); Cara Lea Burnidge, *A Peaceful Conquest: Woodrow Wilson, Religion, and the New World Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

²⁴ Patricia O'Toole, *The Moralist: Woodrow Wilson and the World He Made* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

²⁵ See especially Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Stanley Hoffmann, "The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism," *Foreign Policy* 98 (Spring 1995), 159-177; G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

²⁶ Walter Russell Mead, *Power, Terror, Peace, and War: America's Grand Strategy in a World at Risk* (New York: Knopf, 2004); David M. Kennedy, "What 'W' owes to 'WW,'" *Atlantic Monthly* (March 2005), 36-40; Melvin P. Leffler, "9/11 and American Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History* 29:3 (2005): 395-413; Tony Smith, *A Pact with the Devil: Washington's Bid for World Supremacy and the Betrayal of the American Promise* (New York: Routledge, 2007); and Joan Hoff, *A Faustian Foreign Policy from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush: Dreams of Perfectibility* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

²⁷ For a detailed argument along these lines and Smith's response, see our respective contributions to "Tony Smith, *Why Wilson Matters: The Origins of American Liberal Internationalism and Its Crisis Today*," *H-Diplo Roundtable Review* 19:16 (2017): 19-21, 22-27.

rehabilitating Wilson as a democratic sage for a world giddy and reeling from the fall of Communism.²⁸ Such champions of Wilson's legacy usefully emphasized the democratically integrative implications of Wilson's vision for the League, and their works remain valuable to this day. Yet they and others charitably inclined toward international cooperation sometimes failed to achieve critical distance from their respective postwar contexts, with the consequence of conflating the imperialistic and hegemonic systems that emerged after 1920, 1945, and 1989 with an ostensibly Wilsonian "triumph of internationalism."²⁹

Herein lay much of the importance of Knock's book. First, Knock did not shy away from placing much of the onus for the Senate's failure to consent to League membership on Wilson (127-128, 243-244, 260-262, 265-267). But nor did he jump from historical to moral judgments regarding his subject's "tragic decline and failure" (276). When Knock wrote, Alexander and Juliet George's mystifyingly durable Freudian interpretation still convinced many historians that Wilson's need to surpass his long-dead father in force and imposition of will caused the breakdown of negotiations between him and his Senate rivals, while a more recent convergence of historical and medical scholarship blamed the neurological effects of Wilson's October, 1919 stroke.³⁰ Knock, though acknowledging the roles of personality and health, preferred to focus on political history. By the time the Senate voted on the Treaty of Versailles, Knock argued, the gulf between the progressive and conservative internationalist visions for settlement had widened—at least in Washington—beyond the ability of semantic or technical compromises to bridge. This widening was due, in part, to the fact that Henry Cabot Lodge had come to see Wilson as a personal rival and the success of Wilson's program as an existential threat to the Republican Party. But it was also due to genuine philosophical differences over the relative value, moral and practical, of international cooperation versus unilateral authority—differences that Wilson, in any state of mind or health, would have found excruciatingly difficult to ignore, and in the event found intolerable (265-267).

Second, Knock insisted that accounts of Wilson's legacy be grounded in verifiable historical facts—not only the historical facts of Wilson's own era, but those of later days as well. In a brilliant epilogue, Knock quickly but thoroughly dismantled the argument "that the American architects of the Cold War attempted, either in principle or policy, forthrightly to find and employ Wilsonian instruments" for securing international peace and promoting cooperative governance (273). President Franklin D. Roosevelt, he objected, explicitly envisioned the United Nations as a Great-Power police force rather than an international parliament, while successors from Harry S. Truman to George H. W. Bush sought to undermine even that quasi-internationalist role. Intent on preserving American freedom of action at all costs, policy planners from the late 1940s through the late 1980s redefined collective security to mean an ostensible "balance" of power that was, in fact, acutely sensitive to the pressure of the American thumb: a balance, explained policy planner George F. Kennan in 1947, calibrated not to advance any abstract national interest in "world peace" but to protect an even more abstract interest in "interests" pure and simple (273-274, Kennan quoted 274). "What triumphed in the postwar period," Knock concluded, "was at best a

²⁸ Denna Frank Fleming, *The United States and the League of Nations, 1918–1920* (New York: Putnam's, 1932); and Arthur S. Link, *Wilson the Diplomatist: A Look at His Major Foreign Policies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957); Betty Miller Unterberger, *The United States, Revolutionary Russia, and the Rise of Czechoslovakia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); August Heckscher, *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York: Scribner, 1991).

²⁹ Robert Divine, *Second Chance: The Triumph of Internationalism in America during World War II* (New York: Atheneum, 1967). Decidedly more critical, but still conflating Wilsonian foreign policy with the policies of other administrations, is Frank Ninkovich, *The Wilsonian Century: U.S. Foreign Policy Since 1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

³⁰ Alexander L. and Juliette L. George, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House: A Personality Study* (New York: J. Day, 1956); Edwin A. Weinstein, *Woodrow Wilson: A Medical and Psychological Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981). On these competing interpretations, see Thomas T. Lewis, "Alternative Psychological Interpretations of Woodrow Wilson," *Mid-America* 65 (1983): 71-85; and Lloyd E. Ambrosius, "Woodrow Wilson's Health and the Treaty Fight," *International History Review* 9 (1987): 73-84.

mutant form of Wilson's internationalism, and Wilson almost certainly would have denied paternity" (273). In other words, while others contemplated the "end of history" in world politics, Knock was calling for history's return.³¹

In the wake of this call there has grown what I will dub the Knock School of Wilson scholarship, to which I hereby formally admit myself. It is a small school, comprising a handful of diplomatic, intellectual, political, and international historians who have discovered a Wilson whose thought and policies combined realism and idealism in response to a molten and thus malleable environment, and whose design to stretch the practical and conceptual limits to equitable political integration was both revolutionary and prudent. The same scholars tend to blame historical contingencies and the human frailties of American statesmen, including Wilson, for the failure of his vision to materialize more fully. Some emphasize the chauvinism and racism at play in Wilson's interventions in Mexico and the Caribbean to a greater degree than Knock (who was hardly unaware of those factors); while most follow Knock in emphasizing the evolution of Wilson's views, motives, and policies during his presidency toward consistently greater inclusivity and accountability in global affairs.³²

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Above all, scholars of the Knock school tend to portray Wilson as an outlier, even unique, among the figures who have shaped American foreign policy. They are generally dissatisfied with both the realist and left-liberal critiques of Wilson himself, and their alternative interpretations are unlikely to conjure images of other policymakers in the minds of readers. In their readings, Wilson believed that the only way to prevent another world cataclysm was to recognize global interdependence and organize the international community around the principle of deliberative, cooperative self-government. Wilson insisted that the United States commit itself to the collective formulation and execution of strategies for maintaining peace and promoting well-being worldwide, to create conditions under which local institutions and cultures of democracy could arise and thrive. He denied that American power could guarantee national security; to the contrary, national security depended on collective security, which in turn depended on the inclusive, cooperative identification and pursuit of common international interests, not American moral or political dictates. Hence Wilson's goal was the gradual development of a powerful, deliberative, political body, with whatever degree of sovereignty over its members' activities was demanded by peace and justice. Regardless of how compelling that goal was in Wilson's day or after, goes this argument, no one else with power to pursue it has done so with any vigor since.³³

This is not to deny the continued influence of Wilson's ideas and their consequences on the discourse surrounding American foreign policy. In the wake of the Iraq invasion, for instance, both liberal and conservative intellectuals proposed versions of a "community" or "league" of democracies to foster more prudent and publicly defensible responses to threats,

³¹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

³² See John Milton Cooper Jr., *Breaking the Heart of the World: Woodrow Wilson and the Fight for the League of Nations* (2001); Steven J. Bucklin, *Realism and American Foreign Policy: Wilsonians and the Kennan-Morgenthau Thesis* (Westport: Praeger, 2001); Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 2009); and Trygve Throntveit, *Power without Victory: Woodrow Wilson and the American Internationalist Experiment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). Works prefiguring these in various aspects include Frederick S. Calhoun, *Power and Principle: Armed Intervention in Wilsonian Foreign Policy* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1986); and Kendrick J. Clements, *Woodrow Wilson: World Statesman* (Boston: Twayne, 1987).

³³ The strongest version of this interpretation is Throntveit, *Power without Victory*. See also Thomas J. Knock, "Playing for a Hundred Years Hence: Woodrow Wilson's Internationalism and His Would-Be Heirs," in *The Crisis of American Foreign Policy: Wilsonianism in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. G. John Ikenberry, Thomas J. Knock, Anne-Marie Slaughter, and Tony Smith (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 25–52; and Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson*. For a contrasting and atypical reading of Wilson's vision as distinct from most 20th-century American statesmen but flawed in its rejection of traditional alliance politics, see Robert W. Tucker, "The Triumph of Wilsonianism?" *World Policy Journal* 10:4 (1993/1994): 83–99.

abuses, and crises through established multilateral mechanisms.³⁴ Still, such proposals serve mostly to highlight the persistence of historical narratives that constrict the interpretation and distort the lessons of Wilson's presidency. Everybody knows that Wilson had a vision for a League of Nations and that something called the League of Nations failed; consequently, most assume that the fates of both are inextricable and final. Thus the few modern conservatives to propose new multilateral architectures explicitly prioritize national sovereignty and independent foreign-policy making above all collective imperatives, assuming that the alternative was tried, and failed, in the 1920s and 1930s.

Meanwhile, their avowedly liberal counterparts, perhaps for fear of being tarred with the 'idealist' brush, hesitate to discuss an integrative, egalitarian, democratically amendable system of global governance as even a long-term goal toward which work must begin. It is telling that the most important challenge to the foreign-policy status quo in a generation is the newly founded Quincy Institute, a transdisciplinary, cross-partisan, Soros-*and*-Koch-funded think-tank devoted to halting endless war through "action-oriented" promotion of five quite Wilsonian principles of "responsible statecraft": to serve the public interest, engage the world, build peace, abhor war, and consult the American people. Notably absent from QI's website, however, is any recognition of global governance systems—existing or reformed—as critical or even complementary to realizing such principles. Nor, as of December 11, 2019, did I find a single mention of Woodrow Wilson.³⁵

Doubtless, as John A. Thompson has argued, such persisting confusion and disagreement over the content, consequences, and value of Wilson's brand of Wilsonianism reflects its ambiguous character. Knock's Wilson clearly fits Thompson's characterization of a man committed, at one and the same time, to a "comprehensive" world body including "regimes of all types" and also to promoting values of democracy, self-governance, and human rights whenever and wherever possible.³⁶ The question is how Wilson tried to reconcile these commitments, and what his efforts can teach us. Here readers would do well to consult Knock's new preface, written halfway through the first term of President Donald J. Trump.

After selectively reviewing Trump's "wrecking-ball approach to American foreign policy"—trashing NATO, withdrawing from the Paris Climate Accords, abandoning the international agreement restricting Iran's nuclear program, leaving the United Nations Human Rights Council, etcetera—Knock notes that few of Trump's critics "seek out insights from the president who did more than any other to give life to the notion of a progressive world order." That oversight is unfortunate, for Wilson's internationalism provides "a better corrective" to rampant American nationalism than "current defenders of Cold War globalism have proffered" (viii). I, for one, agree that reveilles for a strategic posture profoundly erosive of international institutions and cunicularly procreant of budget deficits, proxy wars, and terror networks are jarringly discordant with such recurring tragic themes. Those who don't should read Knock's whirlwind tour through the Anti-Wilsonian Century stretching from the 1940s to the present day, and then ask themselves whether, over the eight decades since Franklin D. Roosevelt publicly committed his nation to the maintenance of peace and security through democratic means, the United States has not been as much a hindrance to that goal as a help (x-xiv).

Even if the balance of hindrance and help is more even than Knock implies, it is still worth asking: Why has the project of reconciling peace, security, and democratic relations with neighbors so often frustrated the United States? Because (and this is my conclusion rather than Knock's, though I can draw no other from his narrative) its leaders have lacked the courage to pursue it. It is common for sages to misinterpret the Senate votes on the Versailles Treaty—in which a substantial but not-quite-super majority of Senators supported League membership—as proof of the American people's incorrigible

³⁴ See, e.g., Ann-Marie Slaughter, *The Idea That Is America: Keeping Faith with our Values in a Dangerous World* (New York: Basic Books, 2007); and Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York: Knopf, 2008).

³⁵ See <https://quincyinst.org/about/>. For background, see David Klion, "Go Not Abroad in Search of Monsters: The Quincy Institute, a New DC Think Tank, Will Fight the Blob at Home While Advocating Restraint Overseas," *The Nation* 309:3 (12-19 August 2019): 18–21. At the time of writing, quincyinst.org had no search function, so it is entirely possible that some endorsement of global governance or mention of Wilson was missed.

³⁶ Thompson, "Wilsonianism," 30.

nationalism, then and forever after. Such a conclusion is at first glance dubious and, upon reflection, nonsense.³⁷ The fact is, no U.S. president since Wilson has been willing to extend the basic logic of the American political tradition to world politics: namely, the principle that the power to shape the *res publica*—the stuff and character of common life—depends for its legitimacy *and for its long-term success* on the consent of *all* concerned. Doubtless, there will always be some Americans convinced that their nation, to quote Wilson, “is so strong...that it can impose its will upon the world,” or that “the processes of peace can be processes of domination and antagonism, instead of processes of cooperation” (quoted xiv). Equally certain, however, is the arrogance, ignorance, and folly of believing, in Wilson’s words, “that any nation, even so great a nation as the United States, can stand alone and play a single part in the history of mankind” (quoted xiv). Few would (or rather, should) deny that the supreme failures of American foreign policy since Wilson’s day—the catalysis of global depression, the promotion of authoritarianism in Latin America, the Vietnam War, the Afghanistan War, the Iraq War, the dismissal of climate change—have all stemmed from the same hubristic, ahistorical assumption: that the United States, because it was strong, could stay strong by treating other nations’ interests as secondary or discretionary, and their peoples’ comfort and lives as expendable.

Fittingly, Knock closes his new preface with an appeal to history as an epistemological and ethical guide, with special reference to Wilson’s endorsement, in point fourteen of the Fourteen Points, of a “general association of nations” formed for “the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.” “There is not a single tenet of Wilson’s fourteenth point that does not resonate in our gravest concerns today,” Knock writes (xiv), and not only because humanity faces most of the same problems of collective life and action it faced in 1919, along with many novel ones. Wilson’s call for a “general association of nations” in which “great and small” contribute to the framing, analysis, and solution of common problems reflects a historian’s appreciation for the irreducible pluralism of human knowledge and experience as well as the inescapable connections that bind the fates of disparate peoples together.³⁸ Wilson did not endorse a theoretical solution to the international questions or problems of his day, much less our own. Rather he endorsed a historical experiment: “the pursuit of ungrudging internationalism in order to explore what the habit of international cooperation might accomplish” (xiv). The particular methods of global governance Wilson contrived to launch that experiment were not perfect, but nor were they intended to be static amid changing contexts. Were he alive today, he might prefer a different design—though as Knock notes, resistance to unilateralism, commitment to multilateralism, and “acceptance of both constraints and obligations on the part of the United States” would remain its major principles (xv). The point is that, as historians and policymakers continue to pass judgment on the validity of Wilson’s experiment, and to assess its implications, *To End All Wars* once again reminds us that the experiment was never run.

Trygve Throntveit is Lecturer in Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development and Dean’s Fellow for Civic Studies at the University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development, where he edits *The Good Society: A Journal of Civic Studies*. He is the author of *Power without Victory: Woodrow Wilson and the American Internationalist Experiment* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), winner of the 2018 Richard E. Neustadt Prize from the American Political Science Association’s Presidents and Executive Politics Section; and co-editor, with John Milton Cooper, Jr., of *The Essential Woodrow Wilson*, forthcoming from Princeton University Press.

³⁷ For one extended argument in this vein, see Throntveit, *Power without Victory*, chapter 9.

³⁸ Woodrow Wilson, “An Address to a Joint Session of Congress,” 8 January 1918, in Arthur S. Link et al., eds., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 69 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966-94), 45:538. On the influence of Wilson’s academic training and historical sensibility on his policymaking, see Trygve Throntveit, “The Higher Education of Woodrow Wilson,” in James Axtell, ed., *The Educational Legacy of Woodrow Wilson: From College to Nation* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 407-443.